WATER SHORTAGE SHOULD KO STUDENT APARTMENT PROJECT

`Ponde Place," a private development of student apartments being proposed near UConn, is wrong for Mansfield on two counts. First, the university shouldn't give the developers water when it doesn't seem to have enough for itself. Second, the cutesy real estate name being proposed constitutes an unlicensed theft of the town's historic identity and is a corruption of geological reality.

Until Tuesday's rain, UConn's "Great Lawn," which sweeps eastward from the old academic buildings, was tawny brown and rock hard from desiccation. The Fenton River -- from which the university draws water -- was trickling between blackened boulders. The students still are eating breakfast and lunch on paper and plastic to save washing dishes. Thermostats are cranked up to save water used for cooling. Cars are going unwashed.

In response to late summer dryness, two university officials -- Thomas Q. Callahan, associate vice president of administration and operations, and Richard A. Miller, director of environmental policy -- and the university's professional water manager, New England Water Utilities Services, declared a Stage II Drought Watch effective Sept. 5. Mandatory conservation measures are being enforced.

Something else happened on Sept. 5. The developers of Ponde Place, a limited liability corporation out of Avon, notified Mansfield that it was withdrawing its applications for a wetland permit and three other changes involving rezoning, revising regulations and a special permit.

In its letter of withdrawal to Gregory Padick, director of planning, the corporation claims it needs more time to improve plans for security and traffic along Hunting Lodge Road, following rowdy Labor Day weekend parties. Before discussing these concerns with the community on Sept. 25, the developer will be looking into: "perimeter fencing, controlled site and building access, limited assembly space, security gate houses and resident identification badges" to control student movement.

But I wonder if the withdrawal wasn't also about the water. In September 2005, the Fenton River was sucked dry. The following spring, on May 22, 2006, UConn approved a request for a water and sewer connection for the 632-bed complex Ponde Place. This approval coincided with the rejection of a water request for an existing housing complex -- the infamous Carriage House Apartments.

This year's water chronology is even more interesting. In early August, the university issued a water conservation alert. On Aug. 17, The Hartford Courant published an article on UConn water by reporter Grace Merritt that began, "The state auditors are looking into how a pair of developers got permission to use University of Connecticut water for a private student apartment complex they're proposing off campus." The developers, Karl J. Krapek and P. Anthony Giorgio, are big donors to the university, which raised questions about whether the approval was a sweetheart deal.

On Aug. 27, classes began with water consumption up more than 30 percent. On Sept. 5, the university issued its Stage II Drought Watch and -- on the same day -- the real estate developer withdrew its applications from the town docket, ostensibly for safety concerns.

Did I miss something? The sequence is water, water, water, water, water, and then security. Why didn't the developers think more seriously about security earlier, especially since adjacent apartment complexes have long been known for their car-flipping, bonfire-burning gatherings of multitudes? Could it also be that the withdrawal has something to do with the water?
If this week's rain causes everyone to forget about the seasonal drought, I'll offer an alternative gripe about the development. Mansfield was settled in the late 1600s by colonists who farmed broad sandy terraces in the opposite corner of town, nearest Windham. Because this landscape was speckled with glacial kettle ponds, it came to be known as Ponde Place. The name was changed to Mansfield in 1703. In contrast, the proposed apartment and townhouse complex will be spread over 46 acres of rocky upland with no natural ponds -- visible from Google Earth -- and only 7.5 acres of flagged wetland.

Under these circumstances, calling the development "Ponde Place" is more than a case of town identity theft. It's a distortion of earthly reality, which is precisely the kind of problem that is troubling the world today.